



SHARP FACTS

Oral Sex: What are the Risks?



Oral Sex is Not Considered Safe Sex

Like all sexual activity, oral sex carries some risk of infection with a sexually transmitted disease (STD), including Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), particularly when one partner or the other is known to be infected, when either partner's STD/HIV status is unknown, and/or when either partner is not monogamous or injects drugs.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that oral sex can result in the transmission of HIV and other STDs.

Abstaining from oral, anal, and vaginal sex all together or having sex with a mutually monogamous uninfected partner are the only ways that people can be completely protected from the transmission of HIV and other STDs.

Oral sex with someone who is infected with HIV is **not** risk-free. Some people have indicated that they are less concerned about HIV because of new treatments and they are being less careful to avoid getting infected. But, in spite of the new treatments available to help the body manage an HIV infection, HIV remains a serious, lifelong disease that is best to prevent.

Oral Sex and the Risk of Sexually Transmitted Diseases

The likelihood of getting an STD/HIV from an infected person varies significantly depending on the type of exposure or contact involved. The risk of becoming infected through unprotected (without a condom) oral sex is lower than that of unprotected anal and vaginal sex. However, even a lower risk activity can become an important way people get infected if it is done often enough.

HIV - Measuring the exact risk of HIV transmission as a result of oral sex is very difficult. In addition, if sexually active individuals practice oral sex in addition to other forms of sex, when transmission occurs, it is difficult to determine whether or not it occurred as a result of oral sex or another sexual activity. Finally, several co-factors can increase the risk of HIV transmission through oral sex, including: oral ulcers, bleeding gums, genital sores, and the presence of other STDs.

When scientists describe the risk of transmitting an infectious disease, like HIV, the term "theoretical risk" is often used. Very simply, "theoretical risk" means that passing an infection from one person to another is *possible*, even though there may not yet be any actual documented cases. "Theoretical risk" is not the same as *likelihood*. In other words, stating that HIV infection is "theoretically possible" does not necessarily mean it is likely to happen—only that it might. Documented risk, on the other hand, is used to describe transmission that has actually occurred, been investigated, and documented in the scientific literature.

Theoretical and Documented Risk of HIV Transmission During Oral sex

Theoretical: There is a theoretical risk of transmission for both partners because infected fluids such as semen, vaginal secretions or blood can get into the mouth. There is also a theoretical risk of infection because infected blood from a partner's bleeding gums or an open sore could come in contact with a scratch, cut, or sore on the genitals.

Documented: Although the risk is many times smaller than anal or vaginal sex, **HIV has been transmitted** through oral sex, even in cases when partners didn't ejaculate.

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Syphilis can be transmitted easily through oral sex if sores or mucous patches are present.

Gonorrhea can be transmitted moderately easy through oral sex. Transmission usually to and from the throat during penile-oral contact. Vaginal-oral transmission is less likely.

Herpes can be easily transmitted between the genitals and the mouth when sores are present, and can even be transmitted if no sores are present.

Other STDs which scientists have documented have also been transmitted through oral sex include **genital warts (Human Papilloma Virus)**, **intestinal parasites (amebiasis)**, and **hepatitis A**.

Because anal and vaginal sex are much riskier and because individuals who engage in unprotected oral sex may engage in unprotected anal and/or vaginal sex, the exact proportion of infections attributable to oral sex is unknown, but it is likely to be very small. This has led some people to believe that oral sex is completely safe. **It is not.**

Reducing the Risk of HIV Transmission Through Oral Sex

The consequences of HIV infection are life-long, life-threatening, and extremely serious. Herpes and Human Papilloma Virus infections are treatable but not curable. Abstaining from oral, anal, and vaginal sex all together or having sex only with a mutually monogamous, uninfected partner are the only ways that individuals can be completely protected from the sexual transmission of HIV and other STDs. People who decide they will have oral sex can lower their risk of getting HIV or other STDs by using latex condoms and other barriers. For example, non-lubricated, flavored condoms are available. Other barriers include plastic food wrap or a dental dam, which may serve as a physical barrier to prevent transmission of HIV and many other STDs.

How can I protect myself from STDs

Not having sex is the most effective way to prevent getting an infection. Monogamy is also safe; two uninfected people who only have sex with each other are safe. Washing the genitals, urinating, or douching after sex does not prevent STDs. For more detailed information on strategies to reduce your risk of acquiring STD/HIV see **SHARP Fact "Choosing Safer Options Reduces Risk"** at <http://www-nehc.med.navy.mil/hp/sharp/shrpfact.htm>.

Where Can I Get More Information?

A medical provider should be consulted if you think you may have been exposed to any sexually transmitted disease. CDC provides information through their National STD Hotline at (800) 227-8922. For further information regarding your sexual health, visit the Sexual Health and Responsibility Program Home Page at <http://www-nehc.med.navy.mil/hp/sharp>.

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